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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire with 120 variables was given to 105 high school juniors and seniors in Anthony and Canutillo, Texas, small school districts in which the majority of students are Mexican Americans, to study the perceptions of the schooling experience of this regional culture. Questions covered policy awareness; perception of school, teachers, and administrators; perception of their own teachers' education; school involvement; and general issues. Students' answers indicated that Anthony students saw their teachers and administrators in a more favorable light and felt more involved in school policy decision-making than Canutillo students. The study concluded that students were moved more by their psychological experiences with school officials than by the sociological factors (race, ethnicity, and social class) they brought to school with them. This was demonstrated on almost all figures. Other than size, students in both schools had nearly a sociological match of backgrounds. The study also concluded that students were more likely to become involved in their education if they felt they were involved with decision-making processes. Girls, more than boys, saw school in a positive light. Students with part-time jobs showed a more realistic and mature appraisal of their school. Additionally, students from both schools felt that school was not preparing them for either college or career. (CM)

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MEXICAN-AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL

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THE EFFECTS OF SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS ON HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERFEPTION OF SCHOOL

Introduction

The Rio Grande River runs through the central part of New Mexico before turning east where it borders Texas and Mexico. The pastel blues and browns characterize the high Chihuahuan desert, population centers are spotted on the banks of the Rio Grande, but as one moves away from the river bottom, there is an experience of immense sky and open plains. There is a junction of New Mexico, Texas and Mexico that occurs near El Paso, Texas. In this region, the histories of these communities are mixed to form a culture of Mexican-Americans whose common heritage and living conditions merge toward what one would expect, common views toward American society and with regard to this study, a common view toward educating their children.

Anthony, Texas, and Canutillo, Texas are two small towns adjacent to El Paso, Texas, The population of Anthony is nearly 3,000; Canutillo, 7,500. There are 474 students in Anthony, 76 percent of which are Mexican-Americans. In Canutillo, there are 2,395 students and 86.6 percent of these

are Mexican-Americans. Nearly 90 percent of the students in both districts qualify for free lunch programs.

In order to understand the perceptions of the schooling experience of this regional culture, a questionnaire with 120 variables was given to 105 high school seniors and juniors. There were seven areas of questioning that assessed students' perceptions of high school. These were:

1. Policy awareness
2. Perception of school
3. Perception of teachers
4. Perception of administrators
5. Perception of their own teachers' education
6. School involvement
7. General issues

The responses were run through the SPSS computer program for frequencies. Cross tabulations were run to compare demographic information with school perceptions.

Since from almost every sociological point of view except of size, these two communities are identical, it was not expected for the study to encounter widely differing perceptions of the schooling experience between the two districts. This fact and an analysis of the data have led the researcher to believe that the fundamental unit of influence over students'

perceptions of their school is not the sociological background they come to school with, nor the size of the district, but the daily living situation between teachers and students. In other words, it is the daily psychology of classroom life that most poignantly determines whether or not students like school. Attitudes of the students differ greatly between these two districts, illustrating that how these two groups feel about school is independent of the sociolcgical factors that they share in common.

Examination of the data also illustrates that if students feel themselves to be involved in the decision-making process and perceive that decisions which affect them are not arbitrarily or capriciously made, they are more likely to be involved in school life.

In Anthony, a district one-fifth the size of Canutillo, there is still a great deal of personal recognition between people. There are less than 30 seniors at Anthony High School. Anthony's football team has less than 22 members; they don't have enough to practice against themselves. (What we are observing in this district is an analogue to the one-room schoolhouse--it is a district with one high school and one elementary school.) It is important to note that although Canutillo is not a large district (less than 2,400 students),

it is still five times larger than Anthony. Does this crucial step in size affect student involvement in their schooling experience? The paper illustrates that the school climate, more than district size, determines the perceptions students have of their school.

The Students

Canutillo has 67 seniors. Of these, 52.2 percent are female and 47.8 percent are male. Seventy-six percent are Hispanic. Twenty percent of the seniors have outside jobs and 73 percent plan to attend college upon graduation. In Anthony, there are 38 seniors and juniors in the high school. Fifty-two point six percent are female, 47.4 percent are male. Seventy-eight percent of the 38 seniors and juniors are Hispanic. Twenty-three percent have outside jobs and 61 percent plan to attend college.

Results

Frequencies

In answer to the question seen in Figure 1(a), "Are you involved with decision-making?" 60 percent of the students in Anthony said yes, compared to only 10 percent in Canutillo. On this question, the size of the two districts must be taken into account. Could it be that there is more of a chance to

escape individual recognition in the larger district? Or could it be that the two districts have a different school psychology?

Although Canutillo has five times as many students as Anthony, when compared with districts of a more normal size, both districts must be seen as small and, therefore, capable of providing individual attention to its students. The fact that there is such a discrepancy between the districts in how students perceive their schooling experience indicates that it is the school climate that is different between the districts, it is more than just a difference in size. A further examination of the results will help to clarify this ambiguity between size and climate.

In Figure 2, it should be noted that in all the questions, less than 50 percent of the students feel a need to learn more about the basic skills. The contrast between the two districts in regard to the question, is there enough Spanish being taught (Q. F), demonstrates that in these two smiliar Mexican-American school districts, the students are quite different in their appraisal of Spanish as an important subject to be learned. This certainly could not be a function of the size of the district.

The reliability of their responses, demonstrating that the students are able to answer in the affirmative, is tested

by the question on sports, which shows that three-fourths of the students feel there is enough emphasis on sports. When compared with the emphasis of basic skills, twice the students feel there is enough support of the sports program than the basic skills curricula.

The discrepancy between the two districts is also illustrated on this graph, by the perceptions the students have for their school. Fifty-four percent of the Anthony students think their school is doing a good job in educating students in personal growth (Q. h); only 20 percent of the Canutillo students think this way. By going back to the question, are you involved with decision-making, we are able to see that nearly six times as many Anthony students as Canutillo students think they are involved in decision-making. This same pattern of discrepancy between the districts exists, demonstrating that the Anthony district is more likely to have students involved and, therefore, the students rate the school's performance higher.

Figures 3 and 4 also demonstrate the striking difference between students in the two districts. Literally on all questions in Figures 3 and 4, the students' perceptions of their teachers and administrators show that the Anthony students are considerably more likely to see their teachers and

administrators in a favorable light than the Canutillo students.

It should be noted (Q. f) that only one-third of the students in either district feel their teachers are doing an adequate job.

The higher the percentage (in answer to the question, are administrators paid adequately for their jobs, Q-a) of Canutillo students does not refute this point of involvement because Anthony students feel their administrators are doing a better job (Q-d, a) and, therefore, should be paid more. The Canutillo students, who do not hold that their administrators are doing a good job, say they shouldn't be paid more for their work. Also, the continuously more favorable responses to the questions concerning the adequacy of the job the school is doing, demonstrate that it is more likely to be school climate rather than just school size that separates these two districts.

The difference between districts to the question, are teachers giving enough homework (Q-e), shows that three times as many Anthony students as Canutillo students feel they are being given enough homework. More than twice as many Anthony students feel their teachers are too lenient on discipline than Canutillo students. This information testified to the legitimacy or sincerity of the students' responses because

it illustrates that students are serious about their course of study and more serious in Anthony than in Canutillo because of the students' perceptions of involvement.

The overall evaluation of Figure 3 shows that Anthony students are more favorably disposed toward their teachers. Figure 4, students' perceptions of administrators, shows that over four times as many students in Anthony as in Canutillo feel they are able to talk directly to their administrators (Q.-a, b). About the same percentage holds for the question, do you think school board administrators are solving education problems. Anthony students say yes--four times as often as Canutillo's students. It is almost ten times in favor of Anthony over Canutillo to the question, is money being spent wisely and the same proportion to the question, is school being run professionally.

All of this points to the fact that if students feel they are involved in school policy decisions and able to talk with their school policy-makers, they are going to have a better view of the professional operations of their school. The Pearson's Correlational Coefficients also illustrate this.

In Figure 5, we meet the first graph in which student response is heavy. Students from both districts appear to be eager to take courses in the basic skills and in learning a new hobby. For the first time in the questionnaire, students

appear to reveal their own inclinations, rather than judge school officials or school policy, and when they do reveal themselves, they show an overwhelming desire to further their education. When compared with Figure 2, where the students responded to questions asking do they "need" more training, the responses are well below the Figure 5 level where the wording is "are you 'interested' in improving skills." In Figure 2, the key word is not interest, but need. Perhaps these slightly differently worded questions reflect that the students feel they've learned what is needed for them to function as adults in society; yet, are interested in improving their skills in order to improve their own personal growth. This might be a bit far-fetched to imagine that they read the two sets of questions well enough to respond differently; yet, they must have been aware of the different types of questions in Figures 2 and 5, because they answered them so differently. I think it fair to assume that the students saw the questions in Figure 2 as responding to an interest and desire to further their training, but not as a necessary need.

Figure 6 again demonstrates that the Anthony students are more involved in their schooling than Canutillo students. This is in line with what we have seen about the students' perceptions of teachers and administrators, which have favored

Anthony over Canutillo. And, it reflects one of the conclusions of this paper, that students who are given an opportunity to understand their policy-makers are most interested in becoming involved in school activities.

Figure 7 is based on questions that deal with four problems in education that have been experimentally included in some school programs in order to educate the students about these school issues. The results are interesting, because they show that students in Anthony on all four problem areas are overwhelmingly more interested in learning about these topics than Canutillo students.

Why is it that students from these two districts, adjacent to each other and closely matched for sociological factors, show such a difference in regard to these important topics? Is it size or ambience? Size would have little to do with the desire of students to learn more about these issues, but school climate which either invites or ignores exploration of sensitive issues would have a bearing on this.

The first conclusion of this study--that students are moved more by their psychological experiences with school officials than by the sociological factors (i.e., race, ethnicity and social class) they bring to school with them--is illustrated by the widely differing responses that the

students from the two districts made to the questions and is demonstrated on almost all the figures. The ambience, more than the size, is what characterizes these two districts as being different.

A second conclusion of the study is that students are more likely to become involved in their education and relate more fully to school activities if they feel they are involved with decision-making processes of their policy-makers.

Results of Cross Tabulations

Sex

Is school being run professionally? Forty-five percent of the girls said yes; 5.9 percent of the boys said yes. Is money being spent wisely? Sixty-five percent of the girls said yes; 33 percent of the boys said yes. The girls seem more accepting of school. This fits into the general research findings (Brophy and Good, 1974), that girls are given more acceptance and rewards more often. Boys are more likely to be warned or criticized for behavior than girls. In general, teachers tend to overestimate the ability of girls and underestimate the ability of boys. In addition:

> Teachers tend to have more negative attitudes toward boys, particularly regarding their school motivation and their potential for classroom disturbances and management problems (Brophy and Good, 1971, p. 231).

Thus, it is not hard to understand the reactions of girls who evaluate the school much higher than the boys. For example, girls responded favorably, twice as often as boys, to the question: Do you think schools are doing a good job of preparing students for personal growth? The same sex difference carried over to the basic skills, to the question: Are you

learning enough english; 98 percent of the females marked seldom or never, while 50 percent of the males thought they were learning enough English. Two thirds of the girls said yes, they would like to take a course to improve English skills; only a third of the boys said yes.

Outside Job Experience

When we compare the working students with the non-workers, we can see that those with jobs have a more mature attitude toward the governance of school. The workers were only a third as likely as the non-workers to think their parents should be involved in decision-making. To the question, are you involved with decision-making, the workers responded yes 33 percent of the time; the non-workers, 70 percent. This shows that the workers are more accurate in their judgments about the role of students in decision-making. They realize that students aren't part of the decision-making process and, in this sense, illustrate that their jobs have made them more aware of the operations of the adult world.

In other questions, the workers demonstrate their greater maturity. Non-workers say three times as often as the workers that there is enough basic skills being taught. Is money being spent wisely? Of the working students, 22 percent said yes; of the non-workers, 60 percent said yes.

Although there are differences between the workers and non-workers about school participation, these differences do not seem to be so strong as to mask over the general adolescent question of future plans. Thus, there is no difference between the two groups when asked if school is preparing them for the job market, or to the question, are you interested in learning about career education.

Non-College Prep vs. College Prep

Some of the differences separating the NCP and CP students reflect the traditional status roles of these two curricula. For example, illustrating the greater institutional press or control of the NCP students, the NCP students are more aware than the CP students of how school decisions affect them. Both groups do not feel the teachers are giving enough homework; only 33 percent of CP and 8 percent of the NCP students say their teachers are giving them enough homework. However, the 400 percent difference between the two groups on this question reflects the usual claim that the NCP courses aren't "tough enough."

What is important to note is that neither group shows much respect for the school's job in meeting the goals of the curricula. Nearly three-fourts of those planning to attend college thought school was not preparing them to do so, and

only 8 percent of the NCP students feel they are being prepared for the job market.

One measure of the students' evaluation of their own curricula or track system is the quesion: Is school being run professionally? There was no difference between the two groups indicating that CP students are equally comfortable with their curricula as the NCP students are with theirs.

Pearson's Correlations

Pearson's Correlational Coefficients were run for several questionnaire items that asked about the students' perceptions of school and its policies. The correlations support the hypothesis that students who perceive themselves as more involved in the decision-making and management of school policy are more likely to give high appraisals of their school. Is the school being run professionally? Positive correlations existed for the following: Administrators are being helpful toward explaining school policy ($p=.001$) and, more important, that students are able to talk directly to administrators ($p=.006$).

To a similar question: Are the school administrators identifying and working toward solving school problems, a positive correlation existed with the students' perceived ability to talk directly to administrators ($p=.004$).

Surprisingly, students who perceive that teachers who are doing an adequate job are also perceiving their teachers as being too lenient on discipline. This demonstrates that students who are responding to their teachers are rather put off by the lack of mature behavior of their fellow students. Likewise, those students who felt they were involved in decision-making also felt that discipline was too lenient, indicating that the involved students are also estranged by their less involved counterparts.

Conclusion

What has emerged from the summarization of over 120 variables of high school students' perceptions of their school environment is a dynamic view of the secondary school student. A view which emerges from the sociological data and demonstrates a tendency on the student's part to respond more psychologically or individually than had been imagined. The discrepancy between the districts illustrates that students are responding differently to school in spite of the fact that they are coming to school with nearly a sociological match of backgrounds. It demonstrates that students react differently to the daily living stiuation, that they face in the classroom, and it illustrates that if the students feel the institutional policy is not arbitrary and capricious,

but is concerned with their goals and dilemmas, they are more likely to be less critical and more realistic about school and those who implement its policies.

It was found, consistent with other research, that the girls, more than the boys, saw school in a positive light.

The study also clarified the question about part-time work from high school students. Those students with part-time jobs showed a more realistic and mature appraisal of their school.

In regard to the relation between the NCP and CP curricula--from the students' perception, each track is equally doing a poor job. They feel that school is not doing them justice for preparing them for either college or career.

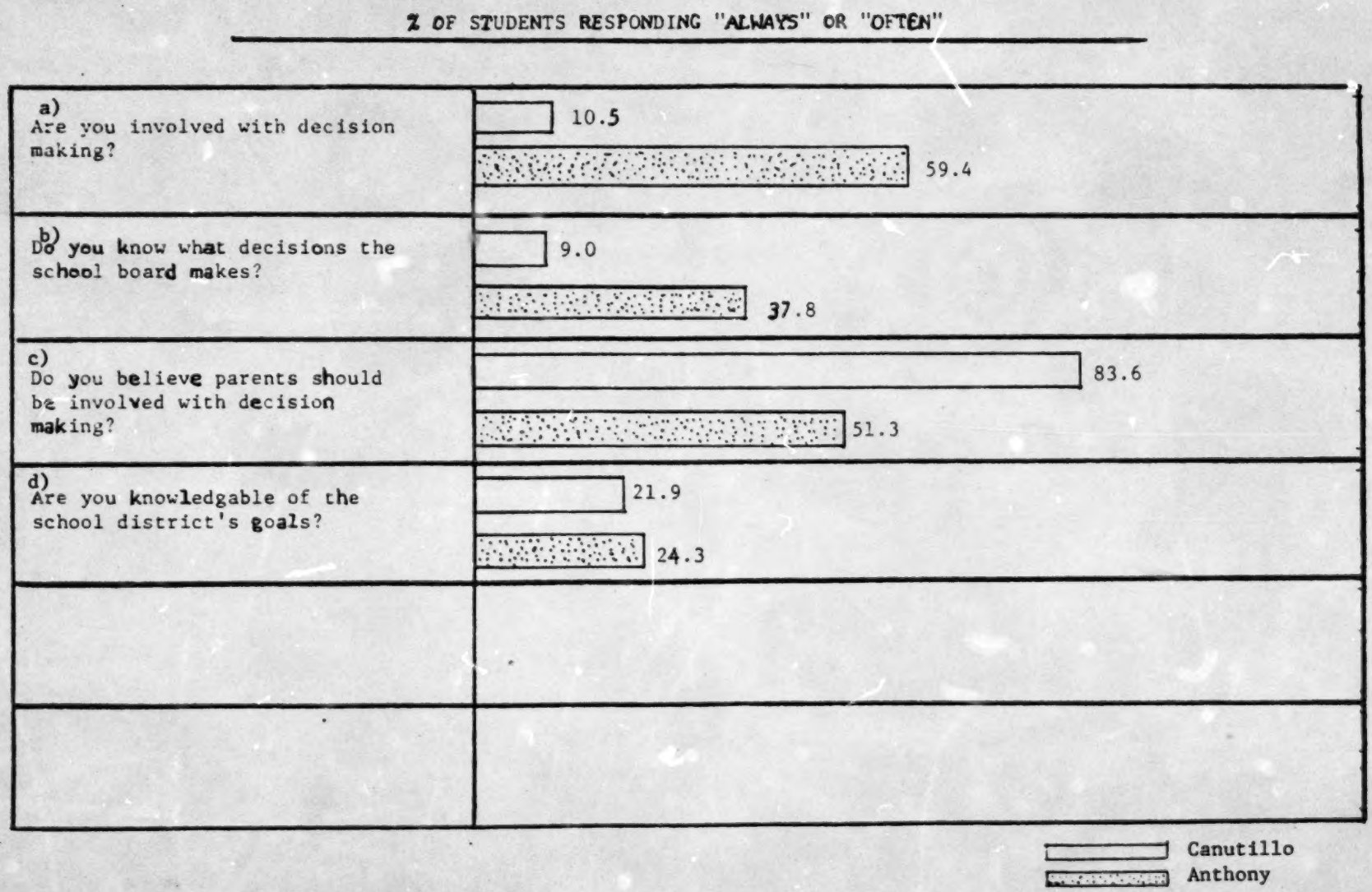

Figure 1. High School Students' Perception of School Policy

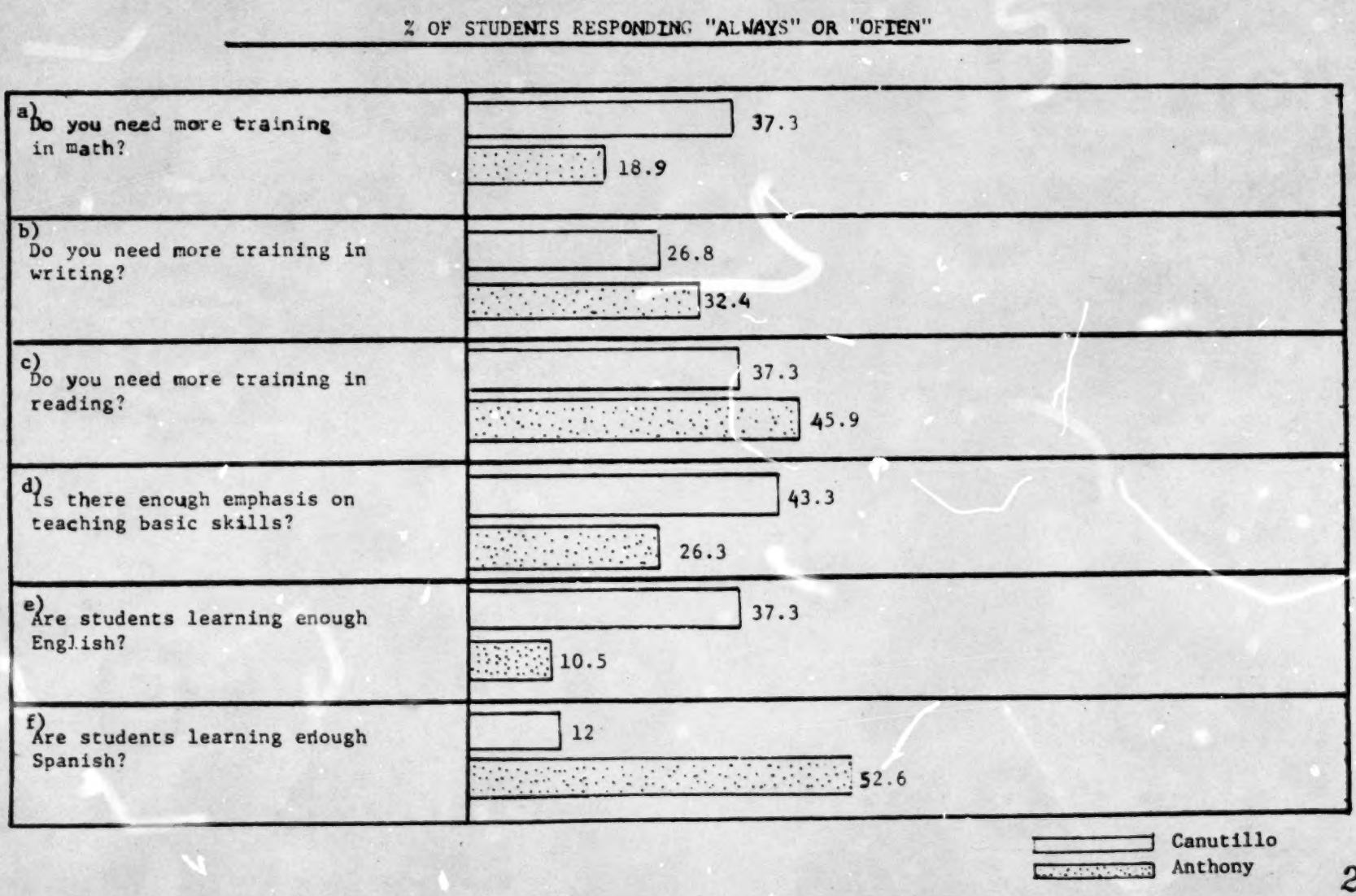

Figure 2. High School Students' Perceptions of the Basic Skills

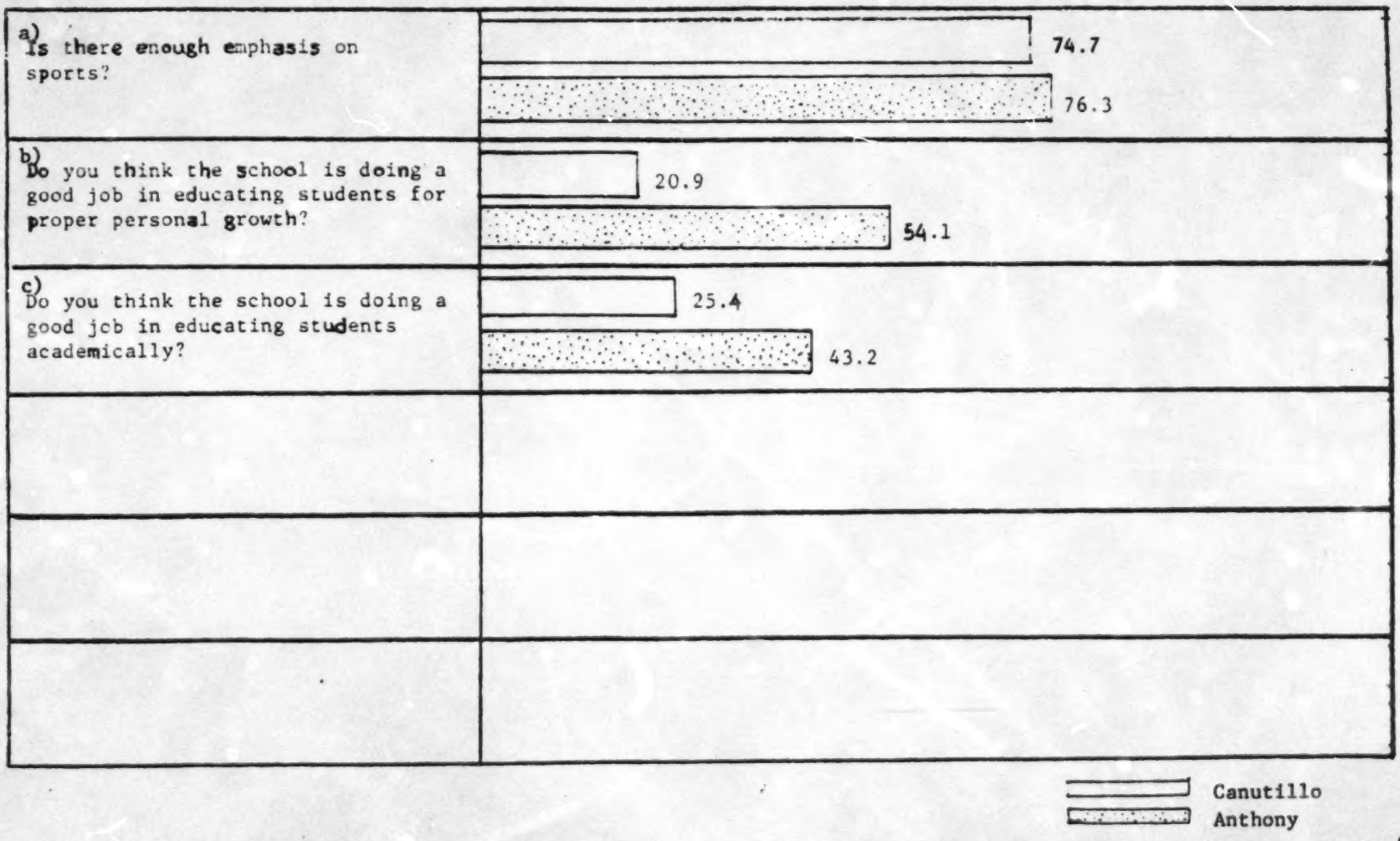
% OF STUDENTS RESPONDING "ALWAYS" OR "OFTEN"
a) Is there enough emphasis on sports?
74.7
76.3
b) Do you think the school is doing a good job in educating students for proper personal growth?
20.9
54.1
c) Do you think the school is doing a good job in educating students academically?
25.4
43.2
Canutillo
Anthony

Figure 2. High School Students' Perceptions of the Basic Skills(cont'd)

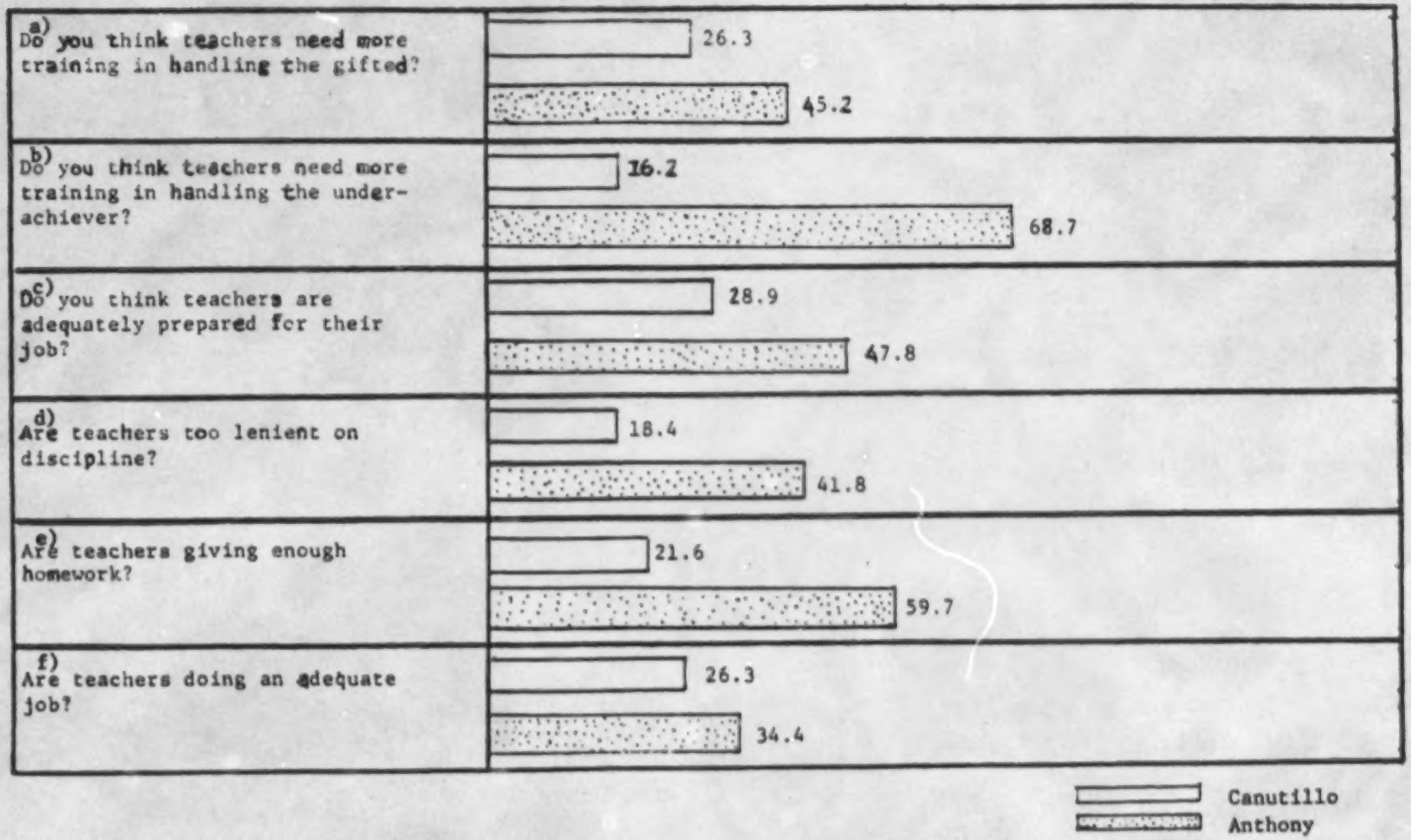

Figure 3. High School Students' Perception of Teachers

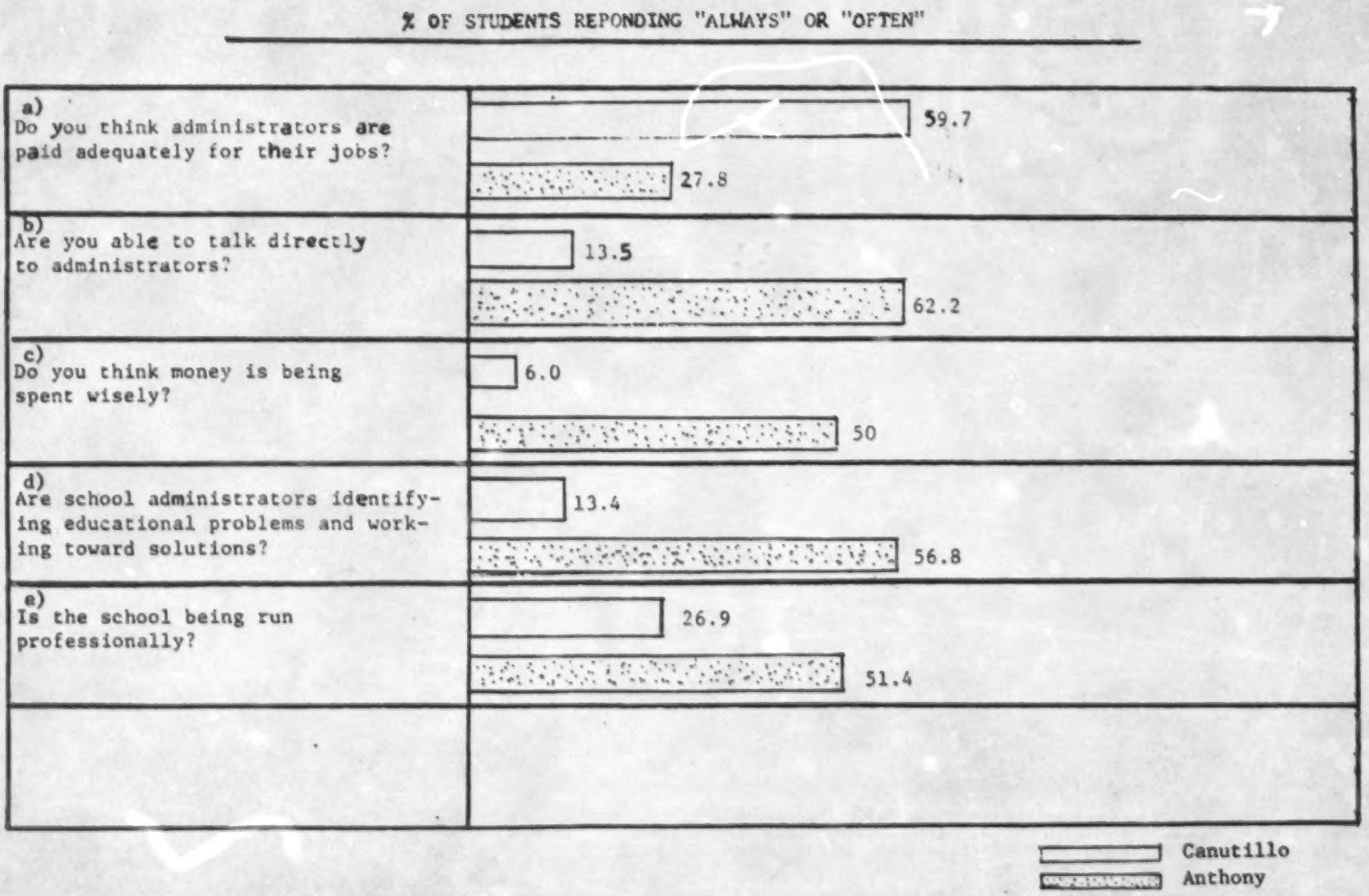

Figure 4. High School Students' Perception of Administrators

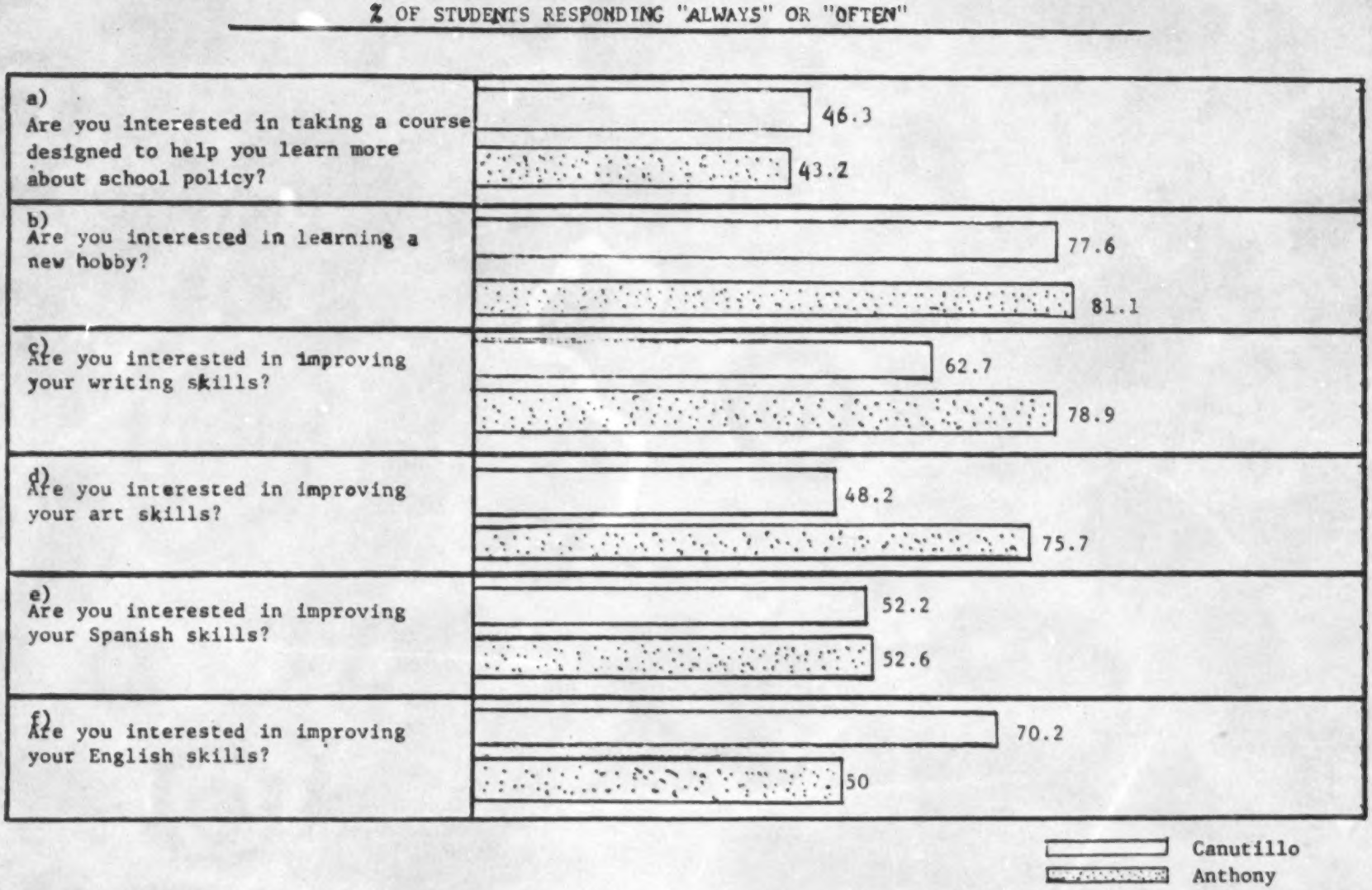
% OF STUDENTS RESPONDING "ALWAYS" OR "OFTEN"
a) Are you interested in taking a course designed to help you learn more about school policy?
46.3
43.2
b) Are you interested in learning a new hobby?
77.6
81.1
c) Are you interested in improving your writing skills?
62.7
78.9
d) Are you interested in improving your art skills?
48.2
75.7
e) Are you interested in improving your Spanish skills?
52.2
52.6
f) Are you interested in improving your English skills?
70.2
50
Canutillo
Anthony

Figure 5. High School Students' Interests in Taking Further Coursework

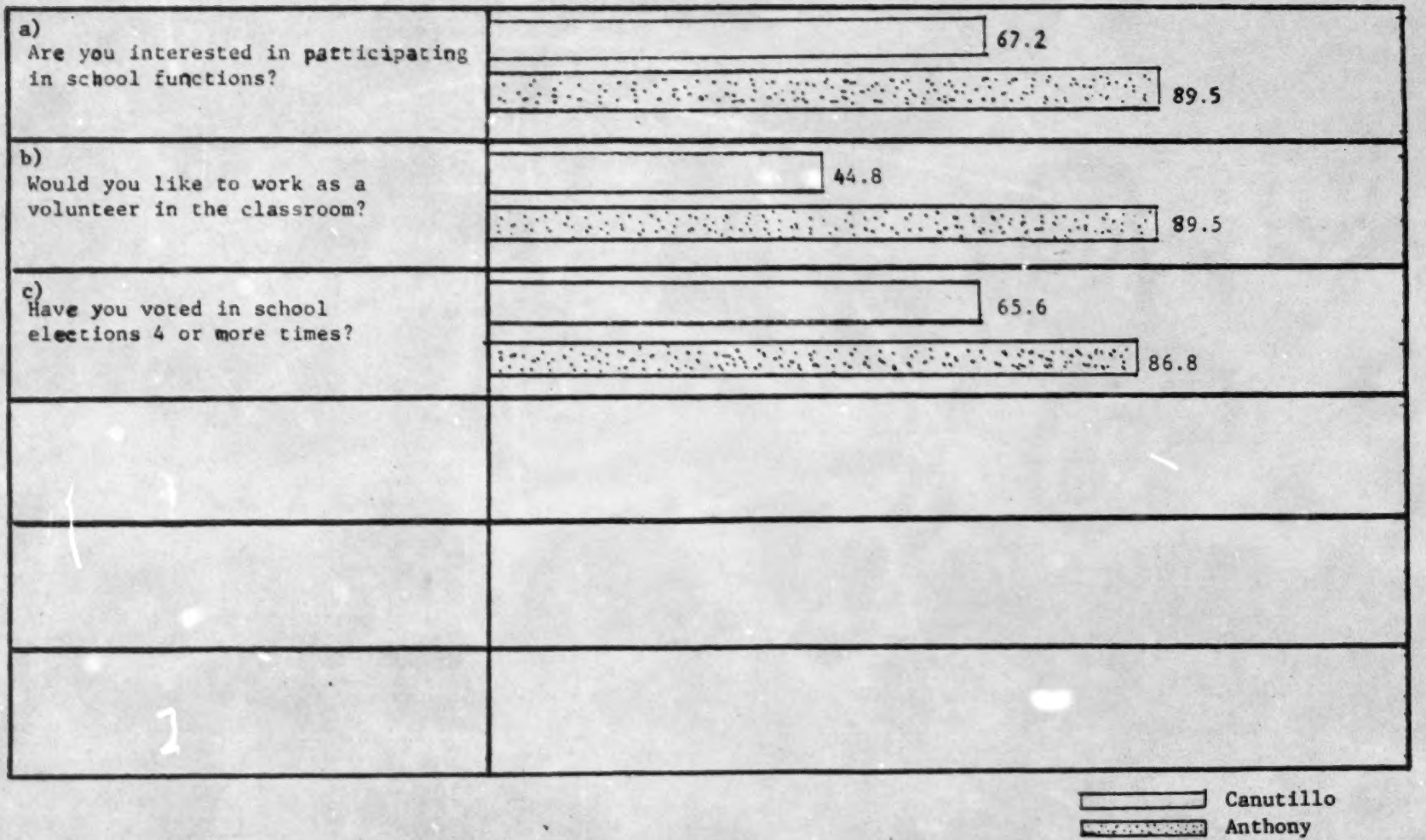

Figure 6. High School Students' Perceptions of Their School Involvement

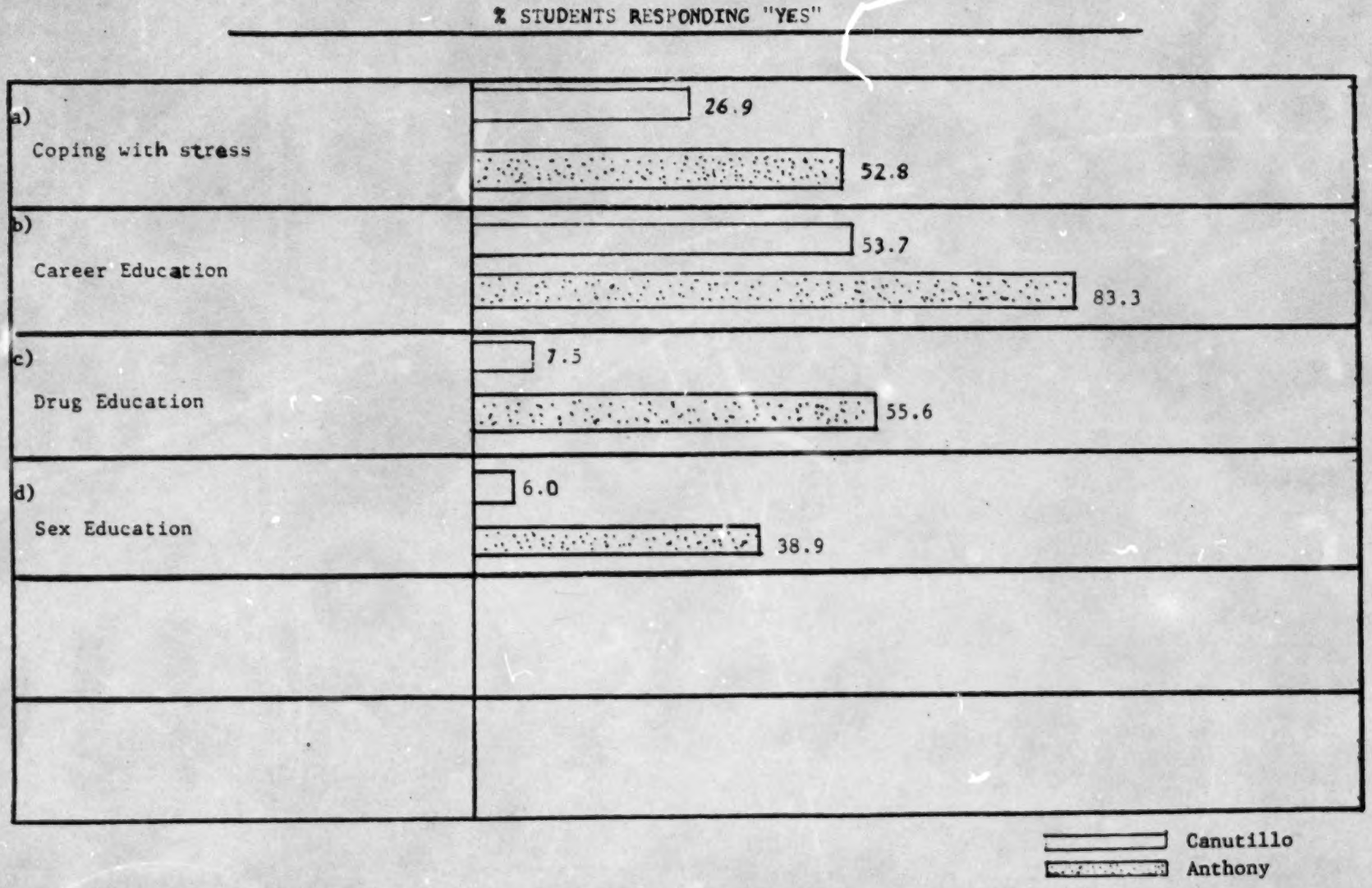

Figure 7. High School Students' Interest in Learning More About General Issues